

Rochester Bridge Trust and Restoration House

17 September 2009

The day began with a visit to the offices of the Rochester Bridge Trust where we were met by the clerk, Mrs Sue Threader. She outlined the history of the trust, established by Richard II in 1399 in order to maintain the then new bridge across the Medway. The trustees have been responsible for providing and maintaining the various bridges that have followed since that date and the trust has acquired an impressively complete archive. The current trust offices, rebuilt in 1879, adjoin a medieval chapel where travellers prayed for a safe journey across the river. Following the reformation the chapel building had various occupants until being refurbished in 1937 by the architect Sir Herbert Baker, for use by the trustees. It now houses a most impressive long table and set of chairs, designed by Sir Herbert Baker and made by Robert Thompson of Kilburn, the 'Mouseman'. The manufacture and also transportation of the table from Yorkshire to its present location would put a strain on present day tradesmen.

In the first floor offices we saw three documentary sets of chairs with their associated paperwork. The earliest were five surviving chairs from a set of 12 singles and two elbow chairs supplied in 1735 by Timothy Matthews and Erasmus Delafield, 'Upholsters and Appraisers at the Royal-Bed and Rising-Sun, near Salisbury-Court in Fleet-Street, London'. The chairs are in walnut and the coat of arms of the Bridge Trust is inlaid into the back splat. The invoice survives:

Sept 24th 1735

<i>The Wardens of Rochester Bridge to Erasmus Delafield & Timo Matthews</i>	
<i>12 Large Strong Walnut Chair Frames</i>	
<i>A Coat of Arms in the back Seats Stufft</i>	15-0-0
<i>And Coverd with Spanish Leather at 25s</i>	
<i>2 Walnut Elbow Chairs Do as by the Estimate 30</i>	3-0-0
<i>A Motto to the 2 Elbow Chairs</i>	10-0
<i>10 Matts to pack the Chairs</i>	10-0
<i>Wharfidge</i>	1-0
	<hr/>
	<i>£19-1-0</i>

Octr 20th 1735

*Paid of Mr Pilcher the ful & all Demands for Partner and Self
Eras. Delafield*

There is also a set of 12 single and two armchairs in mahogany, again with the trust's coat of arms inlaid in the back; the two armchairs are larger than normal, presumably for status. The invoice for these also survives: they are by George Seddon and Sons and date to 1785. (See Christopher Gilbert, 'A Few Seddon Gleanings, Furniture History 1998, vol XXXIV, pp 228-232).

A third set of chairs is currently in use for meetings. Inscribed in ink on the inside surface of a back seat rail of one of the chairs is *R.Kidwell, Rochester*. Although no

invoice survives for these chairs, we were shown a payment to Mr Kidwell in the accounts for 1832, which is thought to be for them. *The Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* records a Robert Kidwell as a cabinet maker and furniture maker in Rochester between 1823 and 39. Several cabinet-making Kidwells are recorded in Rochester: in 1826 Robert was recorded at the same address in the High Street as another cabinet maker, Cole Kidwell, and a John Kidwell, cabinet maker and Freeman of Rochester in 1807, is recorded in London in 1830. The *Dictionary* entry suggests this may be the John Kidwell, cabinet maker, upholsterer and undertaker at 427 Oxford St, London, between 1817 and 27. The family seems to have continued to be involved with the furniture business in Rochester as two Kidwells are recorded as auctioneers in the 1881 census, Alfred, the third of Robert's sons, and another John, who had premises in the High Street, possibly one of Robert's grandsons.

Our grateful thanks for an exceptional visit, where we were given unrivalled access, are due to Sue Threader, Jane Smith and the trust archivist, Dr James Gibson.

A brisk walk to our second venue took us past the cathedral and we found a few minutes for a very brief visit before continuing to Minor Canon Row. This row of houses was built in 1722-3 to house the minor canons and their families. An additional house was added in 1735 for the cathedral organist. Despite conversion to apartments in the 1950s, much of the original fabric and many of the fittings survive. In 2008 the cathedral authorities sold the row to the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust, which is returning the houses to their original plan and restoring them for sale.

Christopher Hartley, who grew up in Rochester, suggested we look at these remarkable houses and Oliver Leigh-Wood of the Spitalfields Historic Buildings Trust very kindly invited us to visit. We spent an amazing time, looking from cellars to attics at built-in furniture, staircases, doors, coat hooks, shelves, locks, safety chains, discussing if surviving panelling and fittings were of the 1720s or later, and much more. If anyone is looking for an unspoilt period house in an historic town and preferably near a cathedral, they need look no further. We owe a real vote of thanks to Oliver Leigh-Wood for his patience and explanations during a fascinating visit.

Our third visit was to Restoration House, so named to commemorate the visit of King Charles II in May 1660 on his way to London. It has a complex architectural history. The house was bought in 1994 by Robert Tucker and Jonathan Wilmot who have carried out an extremely sympathetic and 'soft' restoration. Robert Tucker, who conducted us round, emphasised the importance of natural light and surface textures whether of lime-washed plaster or

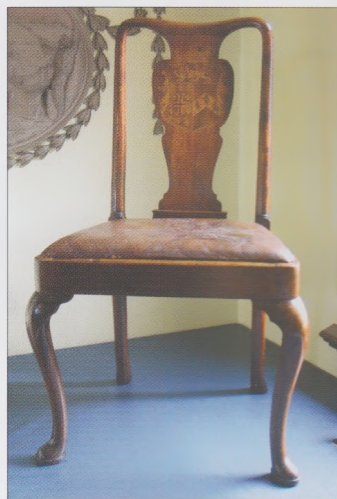
earth pigments in linseed oil and turpentine or woodwork. Shades of 'drab' predominated. Most exciting were the extensive faux marble schemes revealed by dry scraping with a scalpel. Particularly impressive was a faux polychrome marble chimneypiece with swags of fruit. This, it was suggested, may have been part of a hastily run up scheme to upgrade interiors in advance of the king's visit.

Dry scrubbed floorboards, many only recently revealed beneath later 19th century floors, were either of pine or elm. In Kent oak production was reserved for the naval dockyard at Chatham. Elm timber bought after the 1987 great storm has enabled floors to be patched and repaired. These light coloured floors reflect the light upwards just as carved work on chests and chairs 'sparkled' as daylight passed across them.

Items which caught the eye included a rectangular drop leaf gate leg table in oak and ash, a crude 18th century standing food cupboard made up of earlier salvaged pieces (the front stiles appeared to be reused bed rails), windsor chairs with a good covering of at least two layers of original green paint, a small oak ripple-moulded chest of drawers with original lining paper of the 1660s celebrating the marriage of King Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, and items recently bought at the Roger Warner sale. Country furniture sits comfortably and invitingly throughout this exemplary restoration.

Our thanks go to Robert Tucker and Jonathan Wilmot for allowing us to visit and especially Robert for his revealing and absorbing tour.

Michael and Polly Legg, Christopher Hartley



One of the inlaid walnut chairs supplied to the Rochester Bridge Trust by Timothy Matthews and Erasmus Delafield in 1735



A chair almost certainly made by Robert Kidwell in 1832 for the Rochester Bridge Trust